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# Soviet minisubs spying on West, experts say

By Bill Gertz  
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Mysterious tread-like tracks found off the coasts of Scandinavia and Japan has some experts convinced they are evidence of spy missions by miniature Soviet submarines.

According to a Swedish naval commission, tracks that have been found in Swedish waters since the early 1980s are made by small tank-like Soviet bloc submarines, which analysts call "bottom crawlers."

But a civilian analyst who does research on submarines for the U.S. Navy said he doubts the bottom crawlers exist. He attributes the underwater tracks to fishing trawlers that drag underwater vehicles with television cameras used to locate fish.

The analyst, who asked not to be named because of the sensitive nature of his work for the Navy, said bottom crawlers aren't mentioned in any authoritative guide to Soviet underwater vehicles.

The Pentagon's latest report on Soviet military capability makes no reference to Soviet small submarines or bottom crawlers.

Last summer, U.S. Navy officials investigated reports that treaded vehicle tracks were sighted on the floor of San Francisco Bay. But a Navy spokeswoman said yesterday that the reports were dismissed as inconclusive.

However, a Swedish naval commission in 1983 produced underwater photographs of bottom crawler tracks in Swedish waters that the commission said were made by two different types of underwater vehicles.

And Jan S. Breemer, who spent 12 years as a defense consultant to the U.S. Navy and now teaches naval strategy at the University of Southern California, believes the bottom crawlers have been used by the Soviets near Sweden and Japan.

He says the bottom crawlers are capable of crawling onto beaches to unload troops and arms.

"There's no question about it — the photographs taken by the Swedes show tracks that were made by caterpillar-type minisub-

marines," said Mr. Breemer, who has written a book on Soviet submarines. "If they don't exist, then the Swedes are expending an awful lot of manpower and money for nothing."

Mr. Breemer said it was unlikely that Soviet fishing trawlers would be dragging equipment that would leave tracks inside Swedish territorial waters.

Asked if U.S. Navy officials doubt the existence of Soviet bottom crawlers, Mr. Breemer said: "I have had no indications from anyone in the Navy that they do not exist."

Swedish naval attache Capt. Carl Hammar skjold said the Swedish navy first detected underwater tracks in its waters in the early 1980s and since then has spent millions of dollars on anti-submarine warfare forces.

Recent reports indicate that "underwater incursions are still going on" and that most incursions occur near military installations, Capt. Hammar skjold said.

"[Submarine incursions] are probably part of some sort of operational preparations," he said. "They could be used for putting something on the bottom or in preparation for some sort of commando-type of operation."

The Swedish commission concluded that the hundreds of submarine incursions observed since the early 1980s — including full-size submarines as well as crawlers and other minisubs — "clearly show that these were submarines belonging to the Warsaw Pact, i.e. essentially the Soviet Union."

According to the commission's report, the crawler tracks showed that the vehicles are capable of maneuvering to avoid underwater rocks and other obstacles.

Bottom crawlers are a specialized form of the minisubmarine, which is considerably smaller than regular submarines, according to experts who believe they exist.

According to a Virginia-based consultant who works with the U.S. Navy on anti-submarine warfare projects, the Soviet Union has been specializing in minisubmarines for more than a decade and uses them for covert intelligence and special forces operations and salvage and rescue work.

The consultant, a former submariner, also requested anonymity due to the sensitive nature of his work.

U.S. intelligence officials detected the first prototypes of the 50-foot-long, 150-ton Soviet minisubs during the late 1960s, the expert said. The Soviets now have an estimated 200 small submarines — including the bottom crawlers, he said.

The Swiss-based International Defense Review published a photograph of a Soviet bottom crawler in 1984 and described the vehicle as "the type used by the [Soviet] Spetsnaz naval special forces brigades" that appears to be carried in pairs on specially modified India-class submarines.

"The minisub is reported to have a maximum operating depth of 105 meters [344 feet]," the International Defense Review states. "The manned version is said to be designated Argus [and] the unmanned variant, designated Zbuk, meaning 'sound,' equipped extensively with cameras and other hardware."

"They are used for putting heavy things down or for placing things in precise locations — like on a gnat's tail," the underwater warfare expert said.

Bottom-crawler submarines — which are believed to be launched from larger submarines positioned offshore — can sneak into shallow coastal waters and harbors to collect data on ship movements, spot sonar installations that would be targets in the event of a real attack, and make preparations for commando raids.

"They are underwater tanks that require sophisticated mechanics since at intense bottom pressures, it is difficult to maneuver and operate outside the hull," he said.

Crawlers require sophisticated components to operate as submarines that can cruise under water for longer distances, then move on the sea floor on tractor treads in shallow waters normally left unpatrolled by coastal defense forces, the consultant said.

Recently, several Japanese specialists came to the United States shopping for underwater detection equipment after the Japanese government discovered what appeared to be underwater tracks, the submarine consultant said.

Mr. Breemer said Japanese officials spotted bottom-crawler tracks in the La Perouse Strait between the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido and the Soviet-occupied island of Sakhalin.

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